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NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: DROUGHT MANAGEMENT

Technical session

Addendum

Southern African Development Community, Food Security Technical and Administrative Unit: The 1991/1992 drought emergency in southern Africa: a case study

Summary of presentation by Mr. R.T. Muqwara (Zimbabwe)

1. Despite a severe drought in the region of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) during 1991/1992, widespread famine was not experienced, and the development plans of individual countries were not badly dislocated. A range of United Nations agencies and of non-governmental organizations worked with the region's national administrations to expedite successfully food, medical and other aid to some 20 million people. At the national level, early warning systems were instrumental in showing that urgent action and external assistance to meet food needs were required. Both national and regional drought task forces operated to ensure that sufficient food was made available to prevent famine.

2. The SADC regional early warning system became operational in 1985 and, at the start of its second phase in 1990, all SADC countries had national units operating under the umbrella of the regional system.

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3. The harvest in the 10 SADC countries in 1991/1992 was estimated to be approximately half of the normal harvest and the total import needs for the southern part of Africa were estimated at over 11 metric tonnes. Handling and transporting these immense quantities were foreseen as potentially very difficult. To coordinate the region's response to the drought, SADC set up a regional task force, comprising representatives of government ministries of agriculture and of transport. The task force coordinated the implementation of assistance programmes and was supported by similar national bodies and by the Logistics Advisory Centre (LAC) in conjunction with the World Food Programme.

4. One of the major factors in preventing famine was the free flow of information on changing conditions. The Food Security Bulletin, backed by the national ones, documented the seasonal changes not only in weather but in food security; disaster relief officers as well as long-term planners began to rely on them. The LAC bulletins allowed donors and Governments alike to trace the flow of ships and grain into the countries. This free exchange of information was central to the success of the relief effort and has increased the capacity of SADC to coordinate and plan.

5. Non-governmental organizations played a vital role in the process. Targeting potential recipients for relief was difficult, if not unsuccessful, in some cases. Finely tuned statistical indicators, incorporated into detailed registration forms for each household, did not always work on the ground.

6. The main lessons to be learned from the 1991/1992 drought management process are as follows:

(a) It will be important to reinforce the region's capacity to meet its information needs, especially early warning information, targeting vulnerable groups, resource mobilization, aid flows and recovery needs;

(b) Institutional links need to be built and maintained in good times between line ministries and between Governments and international organizations, donors, regional institutions, non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies;

(c) There is a need to expand research and policy analysis of drought induced shocks on development capacity;

(d) Further food security training, especially in the field of planning for and managing disasters, should be provided;

(e) There is a need to ensure that food reserves are either maintained in the region or can be acquired and distributed speedily and cost-effectively.